

Canoe Brook Historic District

The Canoe Brook Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2002.

Description

The Canoe Brook Historic District is located in southwest Branford. It generally lies between North Main Street (US Route 1) on the north and the railroad tracks on the south, and abuts the Branford Center Historic District on the east. The Branford Connector to Interstate 95 is located to the west. The principal streets within the district are Main Street and Bradley Street, which run generally east-west, and portions of several side streets: Home Place, North Harbor Street, and Cherry Hill Road, which runs through to North Main.

Primarily residential in character, the Canoe Brook Historic District contains 107 resources, of which 94 (88 percent) contribute to its historic significance. Principal contributing buildings include 51 historic houses, and eight institutional or commercial structures: two schools, a firehouse, two stores, and a funeral home. There are a few historic barns and sheds in the district, but most of the contributing outbuildings are detached period garages. Modern infill in the Canoe Brook Historic District consists of 13 non-contributing houses, apartment buildings, or residential garages.

The Canoe Brook Historic District encompasses more than 200 years of residential development (1724-1940). Wood-frame single-family dwellings predominate, with either stone or brick foundations. The distribution by century is as follows: nine percent in the 1700s; 51 percent in the 1800s; and 37 percent in the early 1900s. The colonial core of the Canoe Brook Historic District is represented by five houses, all built before the Revolution. While no new construction took place until 1800, the colonial influence persisted well into the nineteenth century. Most of the houses built between 1800 and 1850 utilize this form and display the influence of the Federal, Greek Revival, and Italianate styles in their porches and detailing. Several period porches were added to earlier Colonials in this period. The Greek Revival style was popular at mid-century, and later houses up through at least 1900 are generally vernacular buildings that utilize similar gable-to-street plans. The Queen Anne and Colonial Revival styles appeared near the end of the century, in combination on a few larger formal houses. While there is a small group of Tudor Revivals built in the district in the 1930s, the Colonial Revival was favored for most of the rest of the early twentieth-century houses.

The Swain-Harrison House (aka, the Nathaniel Harrison House / Harrison House Museum & Barn), headquarters of the Branford Historical Society, is the oldest extant building in the district (124 Main Street). Erected in 1724 on Main Street on the west side of the Canoe Brook Historic District, this five-bay Colonial displays facade and gable overhangs. An added rear ell gives the house its distinctive saltbox form. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Harrison House was owned and restored by architect J. Frederick Kelly in the 1930s. The c.1750 Edmund Morris House across the street also has a five-bay facade, but its original main block is only one room deep (139-163 Main Street). The porch and the two-story ell are later additions, possibly added when the house was moved back on the lot about 1929. The Timothy Bradley House was

erected in 1727 at the head of Bradley Street (12 Bradley Street). Another five-bay, center-chimney Colonial, it displays a later Federal-period doorway. The John Rose House down the street, built by 1750 with a steeper roof, was altered in the Federal period (48 Bradley Street). The slightly later Timothy Morris House, which once stood on Main Street, was relocated around the corner at 67-69 Home Place. Another two-story Colonial, it originally had a center chimney, which was removed when the house was moved in 1960.

The persistence of the Colonial form in the Canoe Brook Historic District is illustrated by at least four nineteenth-century houses. The Shepard-Tyler House at 241 Main Street and the Daniel Morris House at 51 Bradley Street were built in the first decade. Both are Federal in plan, although the placement of the twin interior chimneys in the Morris dwelling is more typical of the Georgian style. They have nearly identical porticos, obviously added in the Greek Revival period. While both houses rest on stone foundations, the higher foundation of the Morris House, which has a brick facade, dates from the late 1800s when it was moved from Main Street to this location. Two center-chimney Colonials were built about 1820. The one erected by Timothy Bradley, Jr., at the west end of Bradley Street has an Italianate portico (93 Bradley Street). The other example, the Wyllys Russell House at 148-162 Main Street, has a four-pane transom over the door and a hipped-roof Greek Revival portico. As indicated by the width of the overhang, the roof has been replaced.

The Parmalee House at 41 Bradley Street, which was built in the Federal period, anticipates the traditional gable-to-street orientation of the Greek Revival and other later nineteenth-century buildings in the district. A c.1804 cottage with two-over-three-bay facade and a Federal doorway, it may have been moved from Main Street about 1900. The neighbor to the east is the J. Atwood Linsley House, which was built after the Civil War (37 Bradley Street).

Houses designed in the Greek Revival style appeared in the Canoe Brook Historic District after 1840. Two neighboring examples were owned by the Linsley family on the west end of Main Street. The 1841 James L. Linsley House (96 Main Street), though somewhat altered and sheathed with artificial siding, still has the characteristic defining pediment, while the one built by Samuel Linsley in 1853 (110 Main Street) is a simple vernacular cottage that mimics the form and orientation of this style. Later two-story vernacular examples, such as the c.1860 William B. Smith House at 58 Bradley Street, tend to have a narrower, three-bay form.

Two Greek Revivals on the east side of the Canoe Brook Historic District have full pediments as well as the shallower pitched roofs commonly associated with this style. The two-over-three-bay Austin Babcock House, which has retained the typical multipaned rectangular pediment window, is found at 360 Main Street. The other example, located across the way at the intersection with Bradley Street, was built as a house, but has served as a store since at least 1870 (401 Main Street). Another style variant is the transitional cube-form Greek Revival Joseph N. Linsley House, which approaches the Italianate in its porch and bay window (138-146 Main Street).

Other vernacular houses were influenced by the Italianate style. One at 303 Main Street, which also served as a store, displays the characteristic double, round-arched gable windows as its only style feature. The turn-of-the-century firehouse (341 Main Street) demonstrates how early institutional buildings of this type continued to rely on residential forms. An Italianate style

veranda and a pair of full-height, round-arched gable windows embellish a house built at 10 Cherry Hill Road about 1870 (John B. Sliney House). The small barn next to the road, which now serves as a garage, is probably from the same period.

John T. Sliney built a Colonial Revival style house in 1902 at the corner of Main and North Harbor streets (259 Main Street). An imposing structure, it displays a full-width columned porch and pedimented dormers. Other facade features include a projecting two-story bay on the right. The unusual divided window on the second floor was probably installed when the house became a duplex. To the rear are several barns, which were part of the Sliney livery and construction business. A bit farther down North Harbor Street is another Sliney property, a cross-gabled Queen Anne, which is elaborated with paneled bargeboards and imbricated shingles in the gables and above the shed-roofed porch (12 North Harbor Street, John T. Sliney Cottage). Porch details include turned posts, scroll brackets, and a spooled spindle course.

The Queen Anne style persisted into the early 1900s. It is displayed in the design of the 1908 Thomas O'Brien House, which has bracketed cutaway corners and an elaborately detailed porch (215-231 Main Street). The Queen Anne is combined with classical elements on the Joseph Laich House of 1914 (350 Main Street). They include Ionic-order veranda columns and modillions under the flared pediment over the facade bay, as well as a large fanlight.

The Canoe Brook School, erected in 1898 at 11 Cherry Hill Road [Canoe Brook Senior Center], is a fully developed example of the Neo-Classical Revival style. Designed in an H-plan by Brown & VonBeren, it originally had two-story wings joined by a one-story hyphen. After a fire in 1939 that destroyed the second floor, the building was rebuilt at its present height. Features retained include the classical portico, with its round arch and modillioned pediment framed by narrow Ionic pilasters, and bands of full-height windows with transoms on the side elevations of the wings.

Significance

Settled in the early 1700s as a Yankee enclave of farmers and mariners, the Canoe Brook Historic District was transformed during the Industrial Revolution into an ethnically diverse urban neighborhood, complete with its own institutions and commerce. More than two centuries of development are clearly reflected in the stylistic and formative evolution of the district's architecture, which collectively embodies a community biography of enduring historic significance, distinguished by the special contributions made by many residents to the life of their neighborhood and to the Town of Branford.

Historical Background

The early history of Branford was tied to the fortunes of New Haven, which was settled in 1638 by Theophilus Eaton and the Reverend John Davenport. When the New Haven Colony was organized in 1643, it included the towns of Stamford, Milford, Guilford, and Southold, Long Island. In 1644, upon the invitation of New Haven, a group of 40 families from Wethersfield led by William Swaine arrived to found the new town of Branford, which became part of the New Haven Colony that same year. Land for Branford, which was purchased from the Mattabeseck tribe, encompassed a large tract that ran from New Haven on the west and Guilford on east, and

extended ten miles north from the coast to include present-day North Branford. The original settlement, however, today's Branford Center, was concentrated near the coast just north of the Branford River estuary, a natural harbor. In 1645, when Southold switched its allegiance to the Connecticut Colony, a group of dissenters there led by the Reverend Abraham Pierson came to Branford. Believing that only church members should have a vote in civil elections, they had a fundamental disagreement with Connecticut's more liberal suffrage policies. Although both colonies were theocracies, with an established Congregational Church, Connecticut's voters (then, of course, only adult males) were qualified by property ownership. This issue resurfaced in 1666, when under the colonial charter granted by King Charles II, New Haven and Connecticut merged into a single colony. At that time a disgruntled Pierson left Connecticut, taking his followers to New Jersey, where they founded Newark. Despite this loss, Branford continued to grow and flourish. Blessed with fertile farmland and the best harbor between New Haven and New London, the town achieved a well-established coasting trade by the end of the seventeenth century. In fact, by then, Branford Center had become so crowded, the second and third generation began to take up land that had been divided among the Branford proprietors to the north and west.

The Settlement Period (1724-c.1850)

The present Canoe Brook Historic District encompasses part of the third division, which extended all the way west to Stony Brook, the present-day Farm River, which forms the border with East Haven. It took its name from Canoe Brook, a smaller creek that once flowed through the area, now largely covered by North Main Street and other construction. Because of its geographic location, the district attracted settlers from both Branford Center and East Haven.

Communication and trade had been possible ever since 1640, when a stone bridge was erected over Stony Brook on the road to Totoket, as Branford was first known. This country road became part of the Kings Highway, the major overland colonial route along the coast. Later still it was called the Post Road, which passed through the district along present-day Main Street, where most of the first home lots were located. When Bradley Street was laid out by the town in 1691, soon followed by Blatchley's Cartway (Cherry Hill Road), the essential historical framework of the district was complete.

In 1681/2 a parcel on the west side of the district was set to Daniel Swaine, son of a Branford proprietor who was born in England. A respected member of the community, Daniel was a townsman (selectman) and a representative to the General Court, as the General Assembly was then known. His house (no longer extant) was located at the northwest corner of Main Street and Cherry Hill Road. After Daniel's death, that property was sold to Thomas and Nathaniel Harrison. While Thomas remained in Branford Center, he provided a home lot for Thomas II at the corner of North Harbor and Bradley Street (21 North Harbor Street). Nathaniel lived in the Swaine House and deeded the western part of his home lot in 1724 to his son, Nathaniel, whose house still stands as the headquarters of the Branford Historical Society (124 Main Street, Nathaniel Harrison House). Nathaniel II, a member of the Branford Congregational Church, served as town clerk, captain of the train band, justice of the peace, and deputy to the General Assembly (1736-1748).

The leadership roles of these early settlers in the district underscores the fact that even though Canoe Brook was a closely knit cohesive neighborhood with a distinct identity throughout the historic period, it remained an integral part of the greater civil and religious community. There was no attempt to break away from Branford by becoming a new parish or a new town, as was the case with the settlers of North Branford. Internal bonds were forged, however, by a high rate of endogamous marriage, which not only absorbed newcomers from East Haven, but created a community based on kinship and mutual obligation, one that fully participated in Branford's agrarian-maritime economy.

The lives of several district families were intertwined in the later history of the Swaine-Harrison property. Nathaniel's house was passed down to Nathaniel III and inherited by his granddaughter, Martha, in 1770. Martha, who had married Nicodemus Baldwin, lived there until her husband's death in 1799. In 1800 she sold the property to Joseph Linsley of Branford, and moved to the former Swaine House on the corner. Linsley's three sons built their houses next door to their father: James L. (96 Main Street) and Samuel D. (110 Main Street) to the west and Joseph N. (138-146 Main Street) on the east. The Linsley brothers were founders and deacons of the First Baptist Church, which was located in the center in 1840. Their sister, Charlotte, married William Baldwin, Martha's son, one of three Baldwin marriages in the neighborhood. Laura Baldwin married Wyllys Russell; Martha Baldwin was the wife of Jared Shepard; both couples built houses on this block (148-162 and 190 Main Street). Elihu Shepard, a blacksmith, built a house up the street with his father-in-law, Benjamin Tyler, also a member of an East Haven family (241 Main Street). Jay Edward Russell, Wyllys' nephew, who later owned the Russell House, had a coal and lumber business in town. After serving as town clerk and judge in Branford, he left for California, retiring there in 1878. His considerable estate included part-ownership of the Oakland Water Company and 800 acres in Placer County and El Dorado County, as well as real estate in Branford and Killingworth.

Main Street families were also related to the settlers of Bradley Street. Daniel Swaine's daughter had married Joseph Browne, a shoemaker, who was one of the first owners of the Timothy Bradley House (12 Bradley Street). Two of Browne's sons had an interest in Dutch House Wharf at Branford harbor in the early 1700s. Bradley, who came here from East Haven, bought that house in 1778 and it remained in the family for 200 years. His daughter, the wife of Joseph Linsley, Sr., lived in the Harrison House (124 Main Street). His two sons, Timothy, Jr., and Seth, both farmers like their father, stayed on Bradley Street. Young Timothy's new house was erected at the other end of the street about 1820 (93 Bradley Street). When the first Canoe Brook School was erected west of the district, Seth moved the abandoned Quarter District School on Harbor Street around the corner and converted it to his residence (36 Bradley Street).

A number of district residents were mariners or engaged in the maritime trade in some capacity, especially after the Revolution. Although smaller ports like Branford declined when the shipping trade later consolidated in major port cities, merchants and ship owners prospered until the War of 1812. The local coastal trade rebounded after the war and by the 1790s, war between France and England had opened up the West Indies to neutral American shipping. Fortunes could be made in this period, but it was a risky business, as some in the district soon learned. Archelaus Barker, who lived at the west end of Main Street (46 Main Street), had served on the Oliver Cromwell, Connecticut's first warship, during the Revolution. He was second mate of the sloop

Lyon when it was captured by the British in 1792. His neighbor, Nicodemus Baldwin, owned the vessel. A neighbor across the way, Edmund Morris, also served on the Oliver Cromwell. A descendant of Thomas Morris, a founder of New Haven, Edmund built his Colonial about 1750 (139-163 Main Street). His son, Timothy, built the Colonial just up the street that now faces on Home Place (67-69 Home Place). Timothy's son, Edmund, later had a cooper shop on the premises, where barrels were made to store and ship farm products. His brother Daniel, who went to sea, built his fine Federal style house about 1805 (51 Bradley Street). Wyllys Russell (148-162 Main Street) had a fishing business at the harbor. In the Shepard family, Jared II was an oysterman; his brother Baldwin was a sailing captain in the West Indies trade. Charlotte and William Baldwin's sons were also sailors. Samuel Parmalee, a mariner who built his Federal cottage in 1804 at 41 Bradley Street, drowned in Long Island Sound a few years later. Betsey Bush Grant, a sea captain's widow, lived at 42 Bradley Street by 1842. Her sons were carpenter/joiners and may have built this house.

An Era of Change (1850-1940)

The Industrial Revolution and foreign immigration were the major instruments of social and economic change in the district. The transition to an industrial economy was well underway in Branford before the Civil War. Several manufacturers established factories there because of its ready access to both rail and sea transportation. The Branford Lock Works, the first major industry, can be traced back to a foundry established in 1818 east of the downtown. Reorganized in 1852 by a New York lock maker, the company grew rapidly and had 500 employees by the end of the century, when it merged with Yale & Towne of New Haven. Another major company, Malleable Iron Fittings, was located much closer to the district just south of the railroad tracks. It began production of iron, brass, and wrought-iron goods in 1855, and by 1915, with 1700 workers, became the town's largest employer and a nationally known producer of steam fittings.

Branford's experience during the Industrial Revolution, although smaller in scale, mirrored what was happening in New Haven and other large industrial cities in Connecticut. As newcomers of different faiths and ethnic backgrounds arrived in large numbers, rapid population growth created a need for more housing, new schools, and a restructuring of government. In the district, educational needs were met by the new Canoe Brook School of 1898 (11 Cherry Hill Road), but few new houses were built. There was little company-built housing anywhere in Branford, and in fact, many existing homes in the district were converted to two-family use in this period. While many district residents were employed by the major firms, as well as several smaller companies, others were independent storekeepers, tradesmen, or contractors. Among this latter group were immigrants from Ireland, as well as some later arrivals from European countries.

The Irish began to arrive in Branford in the 1840s and by 1854 had already established their own church, St. Mary's Church, on Montowese Street in the center. Although many urban Irish were upwardly mobile, the meteoric rise of the Sliney family was exceptional. The patriarch of the family, David B. Sliney, bought property in the district in 1853 and by the early 1900s, the family had extensive holdings on Main, Bradley, and North Harbor streets. The principal Sliney residence, the Colonial Revival house that now stands at the corner of Main and North Harbor streets, was built in 1902 by David's son, John T. Sliney (259 Main Street). His father's old house probably was moved to 41 Bradley Street. Recognized as a leader in the community, John T.

Slaney was a trustee of St. Mary's Church, fire commissioner, member of the board of education for five terms, and represented Branford in the state assembly in 1902. He also ran a very successful livery and construction business in the buildings behind his house. For a time, he was in partnership with Michael P. Rice, another Irish-American contractor. Rice, the son of Edward Rice who came here to work at the lock works, was Branford's first non-Yankee selectman, elected in 1889 at age 21, and was the founder of the Branford Fire Department. The 1900 firehouse that stands in the Canoe Brook Historic District bears his name (341 Main Street, M.P. Rice Hose Company #2). John B. Slaney, John T.'s eldest son, lived at 10 Cherry Hill Road. Known as "Mr. Branford," he held public office for 57 years. After 40 years on the school board, he was elected first selectman in 1963 and served until his death in 1981. His brother, Lawrence, an I.R.S. agent, built his house next door about 1930 (6 Cherry Hill Road). Two other brothers, Edward T. and Leo D. Slaney, ran the family's garage and car dealership at 275 Main Street. Thomas O'Brien was another prominent Irish-American who lived in the district. First employed at the Branford Lock Works, by 1913 he was the foreman for John T. Slaney. O'Brien's first house on Main Street was destroyed by fire and rebuilt in the Queen Anne style about 1908 (215-231 Main Street). The Clancys built a house in the district about 1865 (546 Main Street, James Clancy House); their son, W.S. Clancy, had a funeral home next door (472-528 Main Street, W.S. Clancy Funeral Home). Somewhat surprisingly, only two Irishmen were identified as railroad workers, the traditional occupation for many in this group, and they lived in the same duplex right up the street (448-456 Main Street, Lonergan-O'Brien House).

By 1900 a new group of immigrants, which included Italians, Germans, Austrians, and Eastern Europeans, made their homes in the district. A number ran stores and often lived in their buildings. Among them was Ludwig Heller, who had a shoe store and confectionary at 460-470 Main Street. Others took over existing establishments. For example, Henry Bradley's meat market at 303 Main Street, which had an apartment on the second floor, changed hands several times. From 1900 to about 1920, it was run by Herbert Foote, who specialized in fresh and salt beef. In 1925 it was sold to Eugene and Margaret Bohn. The Bohns rented out the apartment above their store and lived elsewhere in town. Joseph Laich, who owned a saloon and bottling works with his son, Michael, built a large Queen Anne style house across the street in 1914 (350 Main Street). Austin Babcock, who lived next door, was one of the last men in the district who made a living at farming (360-378 Main Street). Babcock, a commercial fruit grower, raised strawberries on his property at Branford Point.

The longest surviving commercial establishment in the Canoe Brook Historic District was located at the head of Bradley and Main streets (401 Main Street). Charles Lane was a saloonkeeper there in the late 1800s. The Stojkovics, an Austrian couple, were the owners by 1896, and ran a general store. Their daughter, Frances, married John Resjan, also born in Austria. He worked as a moulder at Malleable Iron Fittings and built the house next door at 361 Main Street. The Resjan's daughter, Mary, married Chester Tisko, who owned the store from 1924 until 1981. Mary Resjan Tisko, a graduate of New Haven Normal School, was a teacher and principal in Branford's public schools for 53 years, and she also founded the Branford Parent Teacher Association. In recognition of her contributions to education, she became principal emeritus in 1980 and in 1983, a local elementary school was renamed in her honor.

When the first Branford directory was published in 1897, it listed at least 25 district residents who were skilled employees at Malleable Iron Fittings (MIF); the majority lived on Bradley Street. They included William Smith (58 Bradley Street) and Elizur Monroe (82 Bradley Street, who had earlier worked at Branford Lock Works. John Collins and John Buckley, two others employed at MIF, bought existing homes (42 and 48 Bradley Street). Several sons worked there as well, including Cecil Monroe and Edward Crouch (83 Bradley Street). Since MIF actively recruited in New York, often hiring people "right off the boat," by the early 1900s many employees were first- and second-generation European immigrants. That was the case with most of 11 MIF workers on Bradley Street by 1928. Two were women: Michele D'Onofrio, who lived in the house built by her father, Antonio (23 Bradley Street); and her neighbor, Irene Groleaux, who rented the house next door, owned by Michele's family since the turn of the century (27 Bradley Street). It was one of several houses either built as duplexes or converted to two-family use in this period. Antonio D'Onofrio, who was a mason, built a brick apartment house at the head of the street about 1911 (6 Bradley Street). The Hustler Athletic Club, probably an ethnic social group, rented the second floor there.

The district was substantially completed between 1925 and 1940. More workers were building their own homes after World War I and residential construction continued even during the height of the Depression. Among this last group of homeowners were the Jakackis, who built a Bungalow at 60 Home Place (John & Bernice Jakackki House). John Jakacki was a moulder at MIF; his wife, Bernice, was employed at the Oakley Shirt Company. Alexander Sabalowski, who worked at Atlantic Wire Company, built his duplex across the street (61-63 Home Place). His neighbors were Otella Bonci, who worked for the state highway department (62 Home Place, Otella & Viola Bonci House), and Bernard Struzinsky, a driver at Branford Coal and Lumber Company (65 Home Place, Bernard & Pauline Struzinsky House). The remaining undeveloped land on Cherry Hill Road, which was owned by MIF, was subdivided and sold off in the late 1930s. Among those who built houses there were Richard Brewer (15 Cherry Hill Road), a druggist with a store downtown, and Weston Shepard (19 Cherry Hill Road, Weston B. & Julia Shepard House), who ran a plumbing business.

As this history of Canoe Brook has shown, the district was very much a part of the Connecticut experience from the early colonial period through to the modern era. Like many other farming communities on the outskirts of cities and town centers, over time the Canoe Brook district evolved as an urban residential neighborhood, a process played out all over the state during the Industrial Revolution. It was in these more urban environments that the majority of immigrants were assimilated. As they did in Canoe Brook, the new arrivals found jobs in factories or established their own businesses, and many founded their own churches. However, unlike the geographic mobility that characterized the urban neighborhoods of large industrial cities, such as New Haven, which were home to successive immigrant groups, Canoe Brook was relatively stable and more ethnically diverse. Over a period of almost 80 years, a series of newcomers from at least six different countries made their homes in the district. To a remarkable degree, their children and grandchildren remained in the neighborhood, and some became the new civic and educational leaders of Branford, thus perpetuating a tradition of community service begun by grandsons of English settlers.

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